BREAD
John 6:24-35
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Among the people of the Outer Hebrides, a chain of islands off the coast of Scotland, traditions and rituals are preserved which began perhaps twelve hundred or thirteen hundred years ago. What makes them fascinating to students of history and religion is that many of them are a curious marriage of Christianity and a much older pagan, Celtic spirituality which extends many centuries before the Christian era. For instance, the Consecration of the Seed. In the unforgiving climate of the islands a farmer needs all the help he can get. Planting is done with great care: rye is sown in November and December, oats in January and February, barley in March and April - and with much ceremony. "Three days before being sown the seed is sprinkled with clear cold water, in the name of Father, and of Son, and of Spirit, the person sprinkling the seed walking sunwise the while...The ritual is picturesque, and performed with great care and solemnity."

The ancient invocation which is prayed on the occasion has been passed down across the centuries.

"I will go out to sow the seed,
In the name of Him who gave it growth;
I will place my front in the wind,
And throw a gracious handful on high...

Friday, day auspicious,
The dew will come down to welcome
Every seed that lay in sleep
Since the coming of cold without mercy;
Every seed will take root in the earth,
As the King of the elements desired,
The braird will come forth with the dew,
It will inhale life from the soft wind!"

(Celtic Invocations, Alexander Carmichael, p. 60)

The inhabitants of the islands knew that the bread, the successful result of the process, was the one thing standing between hope and despair, laughter and tears, literally life and death. There is simply no way you and I can understand the power of that. Others have: that pathetically small band of people huddles on the coast of Massachusetts during the winter of 1620, whose lease on life was, quite simply, one growing season. Others do today - the majority of the people of the world, for instance, for whom bread represents life, salvation, survival.

It is not difficult to understand that bread is sometimes more than bread. "A rose is a rose is a rose" Gertrude Stein reputedly said as a kind of literary declaration of cynical integrity. But bread is not always merely bread. "Take, eat, this is my body, broken for you," Jesus said. During the blitz, many English children were removed from London and placed with families in the countryside. It quickly became apparent that the terror of nightly bombing might not be as painful as family separation. Children were encouraged to keep reminders of their homes and families with them: pencils, pictures, shells, rocks. One child slept every night with a piece of bread from her family's dinner table clutched in her hand. Bread, for her was a sacramental reminder of a relationship and a blessed promise of joyful reunion, peace, love. (see Lawton Posey, The Ministry, 3/80, p. 31, Bread and Wine) The commonly shared experience of being transported into the past, into one's childhood, by the odor of baking bread is evidence of a compelling power.

It was a large caravan heading for Canaan: servants, guides, herdsmen, trunks, bales, wagons, sheep and cattle, wives and children. It has all the marks of a very triumphant entry: a victorious homecoming for an enormously successful prodigal son. Two thoughts, however, dull the shine on this potentially auspicious occasion. One of them is the thought of Esau, who for all Jacob knows is harboring a 20-year grudge and rather relishing the thought of a meeting to settle the score. Esau is still there. The other thought is Jahweh - God - a thought so awesome and relentless and holy - that it never gets expressed verbally. But Jahweh has been there and is there, showing up at curious times, in that peculiar dream about a ladder to heaven, and in sleepless, night-time reveries about a promise and a covenant and a mighty nation. Jacob can't shake the thought that he has a job to do: that he is chosen by the creator to do something, at least to be something - other than the crook that he is.

And so I have always imagined a mixture of motives as they approach the border, and Jacob, a bit ostentatiously, stands down and watches them all cross the small stream called Jabbok and at the very last minute decides to remain behind alone. During the night we are not told what he does: prays, thinks, remembers, regrets - makes resolutions, plans - ? And at some point he is accosted, attacked and for hours wrestles with a strange opponent. When the sun rises in the East, Jacob has a new name - Israel - 'the one who contends with God" - and a limp.

Given similar circumstances, the night before our life takes a dramatic turn, we would pray for strength. A swift chariot and strong shield might be more appropriate for the occasion. Jacob needs to be "equipped for ministry" to use current ecclesiastical jargon, and we would at least turn to the page in the Worshipbook marked ordination and pray God to give him intelligence, imagination, and love. On the far side of the Jabboks of my life I've prayed for a variety of gifts. What Jacob got, however was a limp.

God's chosen, that is to say, gets a lesson in human frailty, human limits, human mortality. That, this extraordinary story says, at the outset is worth having. Let Jacob's new limp then stand for his humanness, his vincibility, and write yourself into this story by thinking for a moment about how important, and how difficult, it is to deal with your humanness.

The theologians suggest that it is a lesson we would prefer not to learn. In fact, we spend a lot of time avoiding it, denying our mortality, unwilling to affirm our limits. We seem intent on establishing something immortal, something absolute. At the most basic level most of us have serious trouble acknowledging the limitations of our own intelligence, our own opinions, our political preferences, our social attitudes. At the most basic level we have trouble seeing that what we perceive is only a part, a very relative part - at that, of the whole truth. Most of the evils visited on one part of the human race by another part of the human race were the result of this relentless absolutizing. Naziism, Communism both posture as the final, absolute solution and because of that confidence, feel called to coerce the rest of humanity to share their assumptions and adopt their systems. When we commit the same error: when we make anti-communism, for instance, the only criteria for our friendship and national support, we end up with oppressive dictators as our friends, and the millions of people they are oppressing as our enemies. A lesson in our humanity is a precious reminder of the limitations of anything human, even the ideologies for which we would die, or for which we are willing to volunteer that our children die. It is good, at times, to learn the lesson of Jacob - the fact that we all limp.

The one who so powerfully appropriated bread as a symbol of salvation, knew it, I believe, as an expression of nature's goodness and benevolence. He knew Psalm 104, for instance, in which God is praised for "wine to gladden the heart of man, oil to make his face shine and bread to strengthen man's heart."

I've read that Psalm all my life without noticing that bread strengthens the heart: not the back, or the shoulders, but the heart, the spiritual focus, the locus of our humanness, in Hebrew terms. What profound disservice we render our tradition when we disembody our humanity; when we regard human being as a good spirit, captured in a decaying, sinful body. Bread as symbol reminds us of the wholeness and unity of our humanity. From our Jewish forbears we inherit a wholesome, lusty, affirmation of the created order, of the stuff of life. The Greeks didn't believe that and taught that the flesh, the material world, was suspect, at best. Christianity has traditionally tilted in the direction of that Greek mistake. And even though Thanksgiving is a national and not an exclusively church holiday per se, it can be a necessary reminder that God created the world and God created our humanity and that part of a faithful response to the creator God is a full affirmation of what he has created.

Physical needs are real. Helmut Thielicke, one of the great and brave German preachers during the Second World War, once quipped to his Stuttgart congregation that if they could take only one object into the air raid shelter, and had to choose between a wool sweater and a volume of poems, they should grab the sweater. Thielicke also said somewhere that even Beethoven sounds lousy on an empty stomach.

We have learned good medicine is - and always has been - wholistic. Good physicians have always treated whole people, not merely fixed broken bones. Healing, we now know, is a process which involves a whole person: when depression and despair and hopelessness are untouched, physical symptoms are not likely to disappear either.

Bread is a scriptural reminder that our humanity - our limitations and our needs - is blessed by God. No less a local authority than Hugh Missildine, commenting on the Lord's Prayer several years ago, said about the petition - "Give us this day our daily bread." "This very beautifully says we're not just agents to something bigger than us. It says 'OK,' let's eat, have fun, on a day-to-day basis." And those Pilgrims, I love to be reminded, were not nearly as solemn as the dour Puritans who followed them. They ate and drank heartily and loved and laughed and sang their Psalms with "mirth" - which sounds like jolly piety with a twinkle in its eye.

Bread is a reminder that God intended our humanity: that our humanness, our needs - are blessed by God: that both our hunger and its satisfaction are part of God's intent. But there is a deeper hunger. There is a hunger that lingers and gnaws even when we have eaten the bread that is only bread: a hunger that presents itself, not particularly in response to the demands of the body, but in response to another need. The prophet Isaiah invites people who have no money to purchase "drink and food no money can buy." Amos alludes to a "famine in the land," not a famine of bread or a thirst for water, but for hearing the word of the Lord. A Sibylline Oracle which is probably pre-Christian declares: "Those who fear God will inherit true eternal life, feasting upon the sweet bread from the starry heaven." (cited by Raymond E. Brown, The Jerusalem Bible, John, vol. I, p. 264)

God insists on the struggle. It is a haunting thought! In one of Frederick Nietzchi's novels a character is talking about why God must die. "God looks with eyes that see everything. He peers into man's ground and depth, into his hidden shame and ugliness." And Paul Tillich wrote: "He is God only because he is inescapable."

The Jabbok, by the way, is not on the map. The stream - the place - is insignificant. So our Jabboks, the places where God catches up with us, will be remote, obscure: perhaps not sitting in church at all, but alone, at night, trying to sleep. Dorothee Soelle, in her book Death By Bread Alone, tells about trying to live through a period of deep personal darkness. She writes, "I had reached the end of the line and God had scrapped the first draft of the design for my life. He had not comforted me as a psychologist would. He had not offered me any of the placebos society usually prescribes...He knocked me to the ground. Gradually it began to dawn on me that people who believe, limp somewhat, as Jacob limped after wrestling with God." (p. 32)

It is God Jacob is wrestling and so we can expect the story to be repeated for us. "Why are we all limping?" J. Barrie Shepherd asks in a poem based on this story:

> Can it be this love of God
> must wound us so that it can heal us?
> Might this halting hip of Jacob signify
> that when we do contend with love, when we
> grapple with and finally are transformed by
> the power of God's grace we become
> more vulnerable, not less:
> more likely to get hurt than
> those who chose always to play it safe..."

If we have lived life, we all limp a little finally. We may not be guilty of Jacob's crassness and avarice, but if we have lived we know a bit about moral compromise and expediency. We all limp home finally with the bright dreams of youth a little faded, with our banners a bit soiled and torn: with failures as well as successes, in our satchel with our weaknesses as well as our strengths clearly revealed.

If we have lived life and if, along the way, we have been accosted by God we will limp a bit. But along the way we will have come to understand that the limp is a gift - a mark of something wonderful. We will have known that God loves and accepts us in spite of our failures: that God loves our humanness more than we have ever been able to love it: that God gives us what we can never earn - namely his grace and love and presence.

The one who learned it first was a distant relative to another who affirmed our humanity by taking it upon himself: Jacob - distant relative of Jesus - who lived our life and died our death and showed us God's great love for us and in whose humanity you and I are given back our own humanity.

The story doesn't end - as all good stories never end. Jacob held on till morning and then, in the light of a new day, limped across the Jabbok into the promised land to live the rest of his life as God's chosen; the same Jacob, but with a new name now and a limp to remind him of that strange night long ago and the incredible thought which I imagine never left him until the day he died - the idea of God, a God who loves and cares and accosts and forces us to wrestle through the night. Amen.

Thanksgiving, Advent, Christmas are inclined to get blended into one extended holiday in our culture. That would seem yet another secular invasion of our sacred territory. Until we stand with that crowd, hungry, and without much tact, or taste, with only our hunger going for us, ask for bread. And until we hear him say "I am the bread of life." Mixing it all together would seem an intrusion until we sense, on the Sunday after Thanksgiving, an Advent of a King who was born in Bethlehem, which means, everyone agrees, House of Bread. Amen.